

Proposal
Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville
and the Art in Public Places Committee
by Sharla Valeski

Visual Artists Then and Now

During the great depression (in 1934) the United States government recruited visual artists to paint, draw, craft and sculpt. Nationwide, these artists were paid \$1,184,000 averaging \$75.59 per artwork, a nice sum for that time (valued at \$1,354.46 in 2016). The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was funded by the Federal Emergency Relief Act. At the time, our government compared visual artists to tradesmen and believed they should be supported along with other trades.

We now find ourselves in a recession or some believe a “controlled depression”. 45 million Americans live in poverty per an article in the Huffington Post, Sept 16, 2014 and the struggle for professional artists has increased as they find it more and more difficult to sell their art. Many artists are working several part time jobs to survive. The Guardian newspaper in Great Britain reported in 2011 that British artists were struggling to make ends meet more than ever before. An artist information company collected data to prove just how difficult it was for artists since the 2008 economic crash. Although the United States lacks this kind of information gathering, we know that “The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) devotes less than 2% of its meager budget to direct grants to individual artists and State arts agencies spend only 3% of their grant dollars on individual artists”. This was in a report by WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) a New York-based activist’s organization.

When you compare visual artists to musicians, dancers, actors and other performers, you will find that it is more expensive to work as a visual artist. Visual artists are paying for art supplies/materials, tools and studio space. The seemingly mythical story of the “struggling artist” is real and spans all disciplines of the arts yet, it’s the visual artist who struggles the most.

From Tallahassee to Jacksonville

If you go to the website for the Division of Cultural Affairs- Florida Department of State, you will find that the granting program for individual artists has been temporarily put on hold. For the past few years, all state funding (for the arts) has gone to institutions and organizations. So, it would seem, that funding for the visual arts (going to museums and non-profits) would trickle down to artists. Yet, for visual artists this is not so. If you were to examine how museums and non-profit art centers and galleries spend, you would find that a very small percentage finds its way to the pockets of individual visual artists. In fact, in

many instances, artists are expected to pay to exhibit in the form of wall rental, exhibition/entry fees, membership fees and even catering allotments*.

Now that Jacksonville artists are faced with a depressed art market, the institutions that should be supporting and sustaining them are simply not. The Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville grants funding to the art organizations with the hope that the allotted funding will trickle down to artists. In the case of musicians, actors and other performers, this is true. The Jacksonville Symphony pays musicians a salary to perform and local theater companies pay actors. Yet, museums do not pay visual artists to exhibit.

To fill this void, visual artists have access to a city building fund controlled by the DIA (Downtown Investment Authority) and the Art in Public Places (APP) through the Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville. This program recruits' artists to design and create sculpture and murals throughout Jacksonville and surrounding counties. Since 2002, the APP has paid over 2 million dollars to artists for sculptures, murals and photographs for a "collection" of art that spans several counties. Unfortunately, only 9.9% of that funding has gone to local artists (see exhibit A). So, let us explore why the APP has awarded over 90% of the funding to non-local artists in lieu of keeping money in our own economy by recruiting local artists.

Jacksonville Artists and the culture of oppression

For many decades, local artists (Jacksonville Fine Arts Society) had worked together to create a space they could have for exhibition, workshops and artist resources. After decades of fundraising, this idea came to fruition with the Jacksonville Art Museum (JAM). It began as a house in Riverside until a specialized facility was built in Arlington in 1978. This facility was an accredited museum but mostly it housed many spaces for local artists to exhibit their work. There was a resource center with a library, a print shop and a darkroom for photographers. Unfortunately, this space was taken out of the control of local artists by a very wealthy woman who (with the director) took trips to New York to buy works of art for the permanent collection, all on her dime. As the permanent collection grew, local artists found they had lost the space they had worked so long to acquire. There was a full-on rebellion and a rift between the elites of Jacksonville and the local artists. This was the beginning of a culture of oppression that would plague the local arts scene for years to come. This culture continues today through our art institutions and an exclusive gallery that recently closed at the beach. These places and people who run them would only show art by nationally, renowned artists, excluding the local artists of merit. Local artists have found unconventional venues to show their work since the museums (on the most part) exclude local talent. With limited legitimate venues, the local artists have fewer opportunities to build a portfolio for the outside world. This has resulted in a grand exodus of local artists beginning in the early 90's. For those who remain because of tenured teaching positions, family ties and real-estate, the future for many artists remains uncertain.

*museums and art centers, in lieu of space rental, will make artists pay catering companies from either an in-house caterer or caterers on a list. Groups of artists have paid up to \$6000 to caterers for events at local museums

Novelty and the Brain

The APP has a process for selecting art for our cities collection of sculpture and murals. The APP committee selects a panel of local citizens comprised of one or two persons from select communities or districts, art professionals and art administrators. These “panels” then review proposals by artists from all over the world along with the proposals by local artists. Time and time again, the selection panels have chosen artists who live outside of our counties. Why this is happening is not so unusual. By reviewing the findings on what is happening inside the human brain, we can begin to understand why local artists are not chosen by the APP’s selection panels. Stated in an article in Scientific America, it’s hardwired into our brains to appreciate and seek out novelty. Researchers tested people with an “oddball” experiment that used MRI imaging to see how their brains reacted to novelty. They showed the subjects images such as indoor and outdoor scenes and faces with occasional novel images (oddballs) thrown in. The experiment found the Dopamine pathways are activated when we are exposed to novelty.

With that in mind- Whenever the APP panels (who live and work within our 5 counties) were selecting the artists for public art projects, they were very likely to be familiar with the local artists and their works thus putting local artists at a disadvantage. In other words, the works of art by non-local artists were completely unknown or new. The novelty of the art activated Dopamine pathways in the brains of the panel members. It is not a coincidence that more non-local artists were chosen. Our brains are wired to choose the novel or unfamiliar.

Time for change

It’s important to understand our history. It’s clear that visual artists everywhere are struggling and on a local level, even more so. At this point, it would only make sense to seek solutions. The most expensive project to date is in our midst and it would be extremely beneficial to have local artists design and create the outdoor sculpture or sculptures for the lawn of the new courthouse downtown. The APP which manages the selection process would not have to put out a national/international call for entries for the courthouse art. They only need to select a “dream team” of local artists of merit. I would suggest that the 3 or 4 artists chosen for the dream team each receive \$3,000 to develop and design the courthouse sculpture/sculptures. They would have 2 months to do this and once the designs were finalized they would proceed with the project with the budget remaining after the APP takes out the administrative and maintenance costs. An artist liaison could function as a point person and consultant to keep the artists and contractors on tract. I would personally like to act as liaison and be involved in selecting the dream team. But before this can be done, we must overcome the doubts some have about the abilities of our artists who happen to be “homegrown”.

It has been done before

There is some faulty reasoning that local artists are not able to design and create large-scale art. But if you look at the Lyrical Light Sculpture in the Times Union Performance Center, you will find that local artists have already proven that, when given the chance, they can design and execute large-scale works. The Lyrical Light project was designed by a group of Jacksonville University students and finalized by vote. The glass portion was made by student glassblowers and the metal parts were fabricated by a local company. Two instructors oversaw the project and gifted this sculpture to the city of Jacksonville to prove that “yes we can do this”. Yet, since that time (2006), no large-scale projects have been awarded to local artists.

Conclusion

In this proposal, I’ve compared how the United States government supported visual artists during the great depression and how that kind of support (during the recession we are living in now) is absent. I’ve noted the struggles of visual artists everywhere and how the struggles of our local visual artists are elevated by a lack of support from our cultural institutions. But most importantly, I’ve come up with a solution that takes money that is already available from the city building fund and designate it for local artists instead of dispersing it to artists worldwide. The large-scale sculpture project for the new courthouse, if given to local artists, would bring the money back into our community and greatly enhance the lives of the artists working on the project. The Cultural Council and the APP could take this small but significant step to making Jacksonville a more sustainable city for our visual artists.

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Date	local artists	non-local artists
2002	\$0.00	\$125,000.00
2003	\$8,489.00	\$504,367.00
2004	\$8,830.00	\$165,000.00
2005	\$66,000.00	\$541,000.00
2006	\$43,432.00	\$216,531.00
2007	\$0.00	\$42,500.00
2008	\$0.00	\$0.00
2009	\$0.00	\$186,000.00
2010	\$0.00	\$0.00
2011	\$0.00	\$0.00
2012	\$0.00	\$12,000.00
2013	\$17,500.00	\$17,500.00
2014	\$8,500.00	\$0.00
2015	\$0.00	\$0.00
2016	\$0.00	\$0.00

